



Research Paper

Designing drunkenness: How pubs, bars and nightclubs increase alcohol sales



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ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic data, this paper investigates the techniques used inside pubs, bars and nightclubs to solicit and sustain alcohol consumption among patrons. Focus is on venues with the majority of patrons belonging to the age group of approximately 15–35 years. The paper identifies a number of techniques, both overt and covert, including: alcohol advertising; special offers (e.g. 'Happy Hours' and 'all you can drink' specials); bartenders' use of strategic intimacy, flirtation, and encouragements to buy more; speed drinking devices (e.g. shot glasses, 'beer bonges' and large pitchers); and architectural features that hamper moderate drinking while accelerating the purchase and intake of alcohol. These techniques were used most extensively in low-priced venues with the youngest patrons (e.g. themed chain pubs) and less so in more expensive venues with more adult patrons (e.g. craft beer bars). The paper argues that youth-oriented drinking venues may be conceived as staged atmospheres of consumption where individuals are seduced and compelled into purchasing alcohol. A team of 12 researchers collected the data through interviews and observations in pubs, bars and nightclubs in four cities across Denmark.

Introduction

The human tendency to experiment with altered states of mind is universal, irrepressible and takes on multiple forms across the world. Some mind altering techniques (e.g. sustained collective dancing) are associated mainly with positive effects, such as experiences of solidarity and union (St. John, 2004), whereas others (e.g. methamphetamine use) are connected primarily with adverse effects, such as addiction and overdose (Marshall & Werb, 2010).

In contemporary Western societies, alcohol is the most popular substance by which people achieve altered states of mind (Lieber, 1992). In a country like Denmark, where the data for this article was collected, alcohol is usually consumed on social occasions where the drinking is fast-paced and aimed at intoxication – a drinking pattern found throughout the so-called 'binge drinking belt of Europe', which includes the Nordic countries, England, Ireland, Russia and the eastern parts of Germany (Pedersen, Copes, & Sandberg, 2016). Drinking to intoxication has numerous adverse effects (Rehm, 2011) and is the focus of much public discussion, the fiercest debates revolving around alcohol consumption by young people (Measham & Brain, 2005). In the media, young drinkers are commonly portrayed as innately irresponsible, destructive and in need of control. However, the reason for binge drinking lies not only with the drinkers themselves, but also with the

increasingly sophisticated ways that alcohol is being marketed via television (Patil, Winpenny, Elliott, Rohr, & Nolte, 2014), social media websites (Winpenny, Marteau, & Nolte, 2014), popular music (Hardcastle, Hughes, Sharples, & Bellis, 2015), cultural and sporting events (Gee, Jackson, & Sam, 2016) and in drinking venues such as pubs, bars and nightclubs (Hadfield, 2006).

Many researchers argue that drinking venues constitute a primary site for the promotion and proliferation of heavy drinking (e.g. Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2003); however, only a few have sought to expose the actual techniques that venues employ to increase drinking. Using ethnographic methods, and drawing on the theoretical concept of 'atmosphere' (Bille, Bjerregaard, & Sørensen, 2015; Böhme, 1993; Borch, 2014), this paper investigates the overt and covert techniques deployed inside pubs, bars and nightclubs to solicit and sustain heavy drinking. We argue that, far from being 'hedonistic playgrounds' where 'anything goes', drinking venues are carefully calibrated to accommodate the human tendency for mind alteration while narrowing and channelling this tendency in the direction of alcohol consumption.

The night-time economy and its discontents

Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing body of research around the notion of 'night-time economy' (NTE), meaning the leisure

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and retail provisions of cities at night (Graham & Homel, 2008). Early studies invested high hopes in the NTE (Shaw, 2010). It was envisioned that an increase in the number of entertainment and retail providers, combined with longer opening hours, would create economic and cultural growth in inner city areas suffering from post-industrial decline and unemployment (Bianchini, 1995). In the wake of these optimistic debates, and partly as a consequence thereof, came a period of deregulation of planning and licensing laws in cities across the UK (Hobbs et al., 2003), Denmark (Søgaard, 2013) and Australia (Lindsay, 2009, see also Hadfield, 2009). Alcohol-centred businesses blossomed, and on Friday and Saturday nights, inner city areas were filled with crowds of predominantly young revellers.

From around 2000, studies on the NTE grew more critical as it became obvious that the widespread deregulation had a number of unforeseen negative consequences such as increased drinking and alcohol-related accidents (Hadfield, 2015; Shaw, 2010). Urban geographers pointed out that many inner cities were seeing a shift in ownership away from locally-owned community pubs towards nationally- or internationally-owned chain venues (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002; Eldridge & Roberts, 2008; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003; Roberts, 2006). This concentration of ownership entailed a gentrification of nightlife, and concern was raised that nightlife districts were turning into ‘no go’ zones for the poor, older people and certain ethnic groups (Roberts, 2006). Districts with a high density of venues – so-called ‘drinking streets’ and ‘hot spots’ – saw increased inter-venue competition as well as increased niche marketing to specific crowds, leading to the concentration of alcohol-related problems in certain venues (e.g. venues catering for young binge drinkers) (Gruenewald, 2007; Roberts, 2009).

From the ranks of sociology and criminology, criticism was raised that the NTE was based on the capitalist exploitation of young people’s desire to experiment with their minds, bodies and social relationships (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007; Hobbs et al., 2003; Measham & Brain, 2005; Measham, 2006; Smith, 2014; Winlow, 2001). It was argued that, rather than being ‘a zone of infinite possibilities, where individuals are free to explore a multiplicity of masked identities’, the NTE was to be understood as a ‘largely ... unregulated zone of quasi-liminality awash on a sea of alcohol’ (Hobbs et al., 2003: 28, 47) in which accidents and aggressions were routine occurrences. The NTE allegedly exerted ‘structural pressure’ on consumers (Hobbs, Winlow, Hadfield, & Lister, 2005: 166), giving a largely false impression of freedom from restraints while in fact delivering little more than illusory fun and fake friendships (Briggs, 2013; Winlow & Hall, 2009).

The wave of post-2000 NTE studies has forcefully exposed the wider politico-economic forces – often referred to as ‘neoliberal’ – which underlie consumer behaviours and experiences in nightlife environments. However, these studies have been criticised for being overly pessimistic, abstract and generalising (Eldridge & Roberts, 2008; Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2008), and for downplaying the diversity, agency and creativity of nightlife consumers (Shaw, 2010; Fjær, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2016). It may be added, moreover, that NTE studies tend only to hint at the issue we seek to analyse in this paper, namely the actual, on-site techniques of alcohol promotion in nightlife venues.

Techniques of alcohol promotion in nightlife venues

A few notable bodies of research have explored the nitty-gritty of alcohol promotion in nightlife environments. In particular, research on bartenders, waiters, DJs, comperes and ‘gigging entertainers’ has revealed how these nightlife workers may boost alcohol sales by using interactional techniques of persuasion and coercion – or through sheer negligence. For example, several studies have found a tendency among bartenders to serve alcohol to minors and intoxicated patrons, even in countries where this is against the law (Buvik & Rossow, 2015; Tutenges, 2009; Andr oasson, Lindewald, & Rehnman, 2000). These practices of serving to nearly anyone, provided they have enough

money, have been found to be encouraged by venue managers demanding a high turnover, and have also been associated with a generalised ‘culture of drunkenness’ within venues (Buvik, 2013). This culture legitimises over-serving, and is conducive to heavy drinking among patrons and, in some contexts, among bartenders themselves (Tutenges, Bøgkjær, Witte, & Hesse, 2013). Studies of DJs, comperes and gigging entertainers in the UK (Forsyth & Cloonan, 2008; Forsyth, Lennox, & Emslie, 2016; Hadfield, 2006) and tourist guides at resorts in southern Europe (Tutenges, 2013) have found that these workers sometimes proactively promote drinking within venues, for instance by orchestrating drinking songs and drinking competitions (see also Turner, 2019). Indeed, the ‘nightlife worker’s labor is the production of fantasy, spectacle, and pleasure that partygoers consume, and co-create’ (Mandler, 2016: 2), but in many venues this night-time labour restricts just as much as it releases: it is centred on, fuelled by, and contributing to heavy drinking.

Research on alcohol pricing policy and marketing also sheds light on some of the key mechanisms behind heavy drinking in the NTE. There is near-consensus in this body of research that when alcohol prices go down, consumption goes up, and vice versa (Babor et al., 2003). Reductions in alcohol taxes will thus lead to an increase in a population’s alcohol consumption (Elder et al., 2010); and short-term, local price reductions, for instance during ‘Happy Hours’, also have the effect of increasing the levels of drinking and drunkenness (Babor, Mendelson, Greenberg, & Kuehnle, 1978; Babor, Mendelson, Uhly, & Souza, 1980; Thombs et al., 2008). Other studies have shown that exposure to alcohol marketing contributes to a rise in alcohol consumption among drinkers (Anderson, de Bruujn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009; de Bruujn et al., 2016). However, these studies on pricing and marketing are not based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, and provide little evidence regarding the ways in which patrons experience and interact with different pricing policies and marketing strategies (see, however, Jones & Lynch, 2007).

Finally, one body of research, which forms a key inspiration for the present study, examines various human and non-human factors in drinking environments that shape the overall experiences of visitors (Hadfield, 2006; Shaw, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017; Böhling, 2014; Duff & Moore, 2015; Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2010). Much of this research is based on fieldwork, and reveals how different factors, such as music and lights, can be strategically altered in order to exert control and enhance profits. Inside drinking venues, factors associated with risky drinking include, for example, permissive norms, rude staff and poor cleanliness (Green & Plant, 2007; Hughes et al., 2011). Importantly, however, these factors cannot be understood in isolation from one another; they form an intricately intertwined whole which may variously be termed ‘socio-material configurations’, ‘psycho-geographies’, ‘assemblages’ or ‘atmospheres’ (MacLean & Moore, 2014). Here we opt for the latter term, atmosphere, in part because it is widely used among young people when they talk about venues and drinking experiences (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2017). Moreover, as a theoretical concept, atmosphere is a powerful tool for illuminating the complexity of tangible and intangible factors that influence the behaviours and experiences of patrons in nightlife venues.

The concept of atmosphere

Following Böhme, we understand atmosphere to be ‘a certain mental or emotive tone permeating a particular environment’ (Böhme, 2002: 5), which ‘proceeds from and is created by things, persons or their constellations’ (Böhme, 1993: 122). Atmospheres are constituted by a blend of different components, both tangible (e.g. sound, smell, vision, texture and taste) and intangible (e.g. discourse, memory and anticipation) (Edensor, 2012). People may be exposed to the same atmosphere and yet experience it differently, depending on their embodied dispositions and inclinations (Böhme, 1993). In other words, atmospheres influence but never fully control how people feel and act,

and, in turn, people influence but never fully control the atmospheres of which they form a part. In resonance with recent developments in actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Mol, 2002), affect theory (Barnwell, 2018; Thrift, 2008) and crowd theory (Borch, 2012), the concept of atmosphere thus brings attention to the intimate, interactive relationship between people and their surroundings, while challenging binary oppositions of subject and object, experience and reflection, nature and culture.

Far from being passive backdrops, atmospheres modulate what it is possible to think, feel and do in specific places. This calls for consideration not just of what atmospheres are, but also of how they are designed, by whom, for what purposes and to what effects (Bille et al., 2015; Borch, 2014; Gandy, 2017). Such a critical approach to the designing of atmospheres has been pursued in studies of shopping (Healy, 2014), gambling (Schüll, 2012), urban brandscapes (Löfgren, 2014), sports events (Edensor, 2014) and crime prevention (Borch, 2008). In a similar vein, our study critically examines drinking venues, adding new knowledge to a small but growing body of literature on the role of atmospheres in shaping the behaviour and experiences of patrons (Böhling, 2015b; Duff & Moore, 2015; Hadfield, 2006; Jayne et al., 2010; Shaw, 2014; Tan, 2013; Wilkinson, 2017). More specifically, we show how youth-oriented drinking venues contribute to the creation of predominantly drunken atmospheres, which revolve around alcohol-induced intoxication.

Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic data collected through two research projects, named, respectively, ‘Safer Bars and Nightclubs’ (Tutenges, Mikkelsen, Witte, Thyrring, & Hesse, 2014) and ‘Desires of the Night’ (Böhling 2014, 2015a, 2015b). The two projects had slightly different aims, but it was possible to use data from both of the studies since they were carried out in the same country, over the same period of time, using similar methods and by researchers who worked at the same research institution.

The aim of the ‘Safer Bars and Nightclubs’ project was to identify, understand and minimise the major risk factors in Danish drinking venues. Fieldwork for this project was conducted by a team of twelve researchers (including both authors of this paper) in the cities of Copenhagen, Aalborg, Sønderborg and Nykøbing Falster. The aim of the ‘Desires of the Night’ project was to explore the reasons and motivations for alcohol and drug use among young people in the nightlife of Copenhagen. Fieldwork for this project was carried out by the second author.

A mix of methods was employed to collect the data, including surveys with bartenders and bouncers, as reported elsewhere (Tutenges, Søgaard, Krøll, Bloomfield, & Hesse, 2015; Tutenges et al., 2013). Moreover, ethnographic observations were conducted in a wide range of venues, but with a special focus on a selection of 26 pubs, bars and nightclubs. These 26 venues were selected after preliminary observations had been made. Two main criteria were used in selecting them: they had to be youth-oriented, with most patrons belonging to the age group of approximately 15–35 years; and they had to represent a broad spectrum in terms of size and type (e.g. traditional pubs, themed chain pubs and large nightclubs). The observations were conducted by one or more researchers who visited each of the selected venues on at least four different nights. The focus of these observations was on patrons and staff members, as well as on the structural design, décor, hygiene, music and overall atmosphere in the venues.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of how drinking venues function, two researchers took jobs as, respectively, a bartender and table clearer in one of the selected nightclubs, to which we have given the pseudonym ‘Blue Ray’. The manager and other staff members in the ‘Blue Ray’ were aware and accepted that the two researchers were conducting observations and jotting down field notes during their shifts. The main focus of these observations was on server practices,

safety procedures and working conditions. After each night of observation, the researchers entered field notes onto computers, detailing their observations, sensations and initial interpretations. In total, ethnographic observations were conducted during 144 nights.

60 face-to-face interviews were conducted with patrons and staff members recruited at the selected venues. Each of these interviews lasted for approximately 90 min. To create a relaxed ambience conducive to creative exchanges (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), it was left to the interviewees to decide where the interviews should take place. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In addition, 20 telephone interviews were conducted with various stakeholders in the night-time economy, including local police officers, politicians and venue owners.

Analysis of the data was a collaborative process that ran parallel to the data collection. During and after nights in the field, the observers and interviewers wrote down notes on anything of relevance, including initial analytical thoughts. After completion of the data collection, the analysis continued with readings of the notes and transcripts and discussions within the research team. The software program Nvivo was used to systematically code the field notes and interview transcripts from both of the projects. For the purpose of this paper, we extracted all sections of data relating to the ways in which venues promote alcohol. We then analysed these sections of data in order to identify the main techniques used in pubs, bars and nightclubs to increase alcohol consumption among patrons. We reached agreement that these techniques can be clustered into three main categories, as described below in the Results section.

Interviewees received detailed information about the project before being interviewed, and were also provided with an information sheet with details describing what their participation would entail, their status of anonymity and contact details should they wish to have their interviews withdrawn from the study. To protect their anonymity, the interviewees were asked not to reveal their full names when the audio-recorder was turned on, and full names were not recorded in the field notes. No data that may reveal the identity of individuals or the selected venues is mentioned in this paper.

Results

Below we describe the identified techniques that pubs, bars and nightclubs use to solicit and sustain heavy drinking among patrons. These techniques are interdependent, mutually reinforcing and enmeshed in wider atmospheres. However, for the sake of clarity, we distinguish between three categories of techniques: 1) those revolving around alcohol advertisements and special offers; 2) those pertaining to bartenders and their verbal and non-verbal efforts to make customers drink more; and 3) those involving architectural and logistical devices which incite and accelerate alcohol consumption. Importantly, these techniques were not used to the same extent or in the same way across all of the venues. In particular, high-cost venues (e.g. wine bars and craft beer bars) that catered for patrons above the age of 25 years did not market alcohol as insistently as the comparatively cheap venues (e.g. themed chain pubs) that catered for younger patrons.

Advertisements

Alcohol advertisements are ubiquitous in Danish nightlife. They come in multiple forms, some of which are overt in their manifestation while others are more subtle. Nearly all of the venues in the study featured advertisements centred on written messages about special offers, such as ‘Happy Hour’, ‘All you can drink’ deals and discounts on whole bottles of strong liquor. Some of the advertisements were simple and consisted of just a few written words, while others were more elaborate, with longer texts, pictures, logos and so forth. We found that the simplest advertisements were used in the venues that catered for the youngest crowd. Here, messages were often focused on the prices of

products, such as ‘10 shots for 100 kroner’ (approximately 12 UK pounds). Five of the selected venues had televisions showing alcohol-focused photographs or videos, for example of happy-looking patrons putting bottles to their lips or raising their drinks in an inviting gesture signalling ‘CHEERS!’ The high prevalence of alcohol advertisements significantly shapes the atmosphere inside venues, constantly nudging customers towards drinking and drunkenness.

Some advertisements took the form of entertainment. For example, one of the selected bars had a ‘starter package’. Here is how two bartenders described the package:

Jim: We have these starter packages ... a new package is promoted each month... [It] always includes a bottle of booze and sodas to mix with, plus five beers of some sort and five [alcopops], some cider things and five shots...

Tim: This month, it’s really good value for money [laughter].

This ‘starter package’ was so large that it bordered on the grotesque. For one person to consume it all would mean extreme drunkenness or death, and customers ordering it therefore got a lot of attention. Bartenders routinely made a big show of the transaction by cheering loudly or applauding, and other customers often made jokes about it, such as ‘Somebody’s got a death wish’. The ‘starter package’ was thus surrounded by an atmosphere of black drinking humour, something which characterised many other types of alcohol advertisements and offers.

Other examples of how venues made use of humour in their alcohol marketing include the following. One bar had a sign on its façade reading, ‘All you need is love... and Tuborg’, and inside there was a statue of a blissed-out Buddha wearing a safety helmet made with a red clown’s nose. Several venues had humorous wall paintings, such as drunken Disney characters, silly looking playboys, bloated pop celebrities and horny baboons. Pictures of regular customers and staff making funny faces and postures were also common. The humoristic imagery and texts in venues did not always make explicit references to alcohol – and yet they exuded a drunken atmosphere with its emphasis on clumsy excess and misbehaviour (Room, 2001).

Some venues collaborated with alcohol retailers to create large-scale consumer events. The Danish tradition known as ‘J Day’ is a case in point. This annual national event is organised and sponsored by the Carlsberg Breweries and marks the day when the Carlsberg Christmas Beer is released. Carlsberg employees drive around drinking venues across the country, handing out merchandise and free beers to get the Christmas season started. The following field notes give a sense of the event and the drunken atmosphere that it exudes:

There is a large Carlsberg truck parked outside of Old Mate. The truck is painted the characteristic blue colour of the Christmas Beer and its sides are covered in a snow-like foam. We try to push our way inside, but find ourselves stuck at the entrance. Approximately ten Carlsberg employees are dancing around wearing blue Christmas costumes. They give away hugs, Christmas Beers and blue pixy hats. A female Carlsberg representative is wearing a big white beard, and on her shoulder is a ghetto-blaster pounding out the traditional Christmas Beer jingle. Everybody knows this one and many ‘sing’ along. Two guys crash into me. They are wrestling over one of the pixy hats, laughing, grimacing, swearing and seemingly oblivious to the rest of us. People are really eager to get those hats ... Outside of Joy’s Bar there is another Carlsberg truck. Inside, the Carlsberg Jingle is blaring from the loudspeakers. Two Carlsberg employees are dancing on the bar counter. One of them is a woman, maybe 25 years old, with bunny ears strapped on her head. She is shaking her head in a forward bend position, generously exposing her cleavage. The other Carlsberg employee is a man who is about 45 years old. He is shouting at the top his lungs and waving his arms all over the place, beckoning everybody to live it up. What energy. The Carlsberg man takes out a stamp from his pocket with some sort of

company logo. Interestingly, people flock to receive a stamp on their arm, on their head, just anywhere—they want to get branded.

Consumer spectacles like ‘J-dag’, ‘Captain Morgan Night’ and ‘Bacardi Party’ conjure drunken atmospheres of endless fun and friendship, in which excess is celebrated and moderation ridiculed (Debord, 1992; Hobbs et al., 2003). These events turn venues into ‘brandsapes’ which provide a ‘total aesthetic experience’ (Kornberger, 2010: 247) designed to direct and intensify consumer desires and create uncritical ‘brand wonderment’ (Andrews, 2006: 95, italics in original). Here revellers are invited to actively partake in the drunken atmosphere, to enact and contribute to it, rather than merely consuming it. This form of active participation makes the events much more captivating and memorable (Penaloza, 1998), and increases the likelihood that they will be reported to others, for instance in the form of drinking stories (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013). Stories of excesses in which one has been personally and actively involved are generally far better—and thus more tellable—than stories of excesses that one has only witnessed, heard about or passively consumed.

The art of bartending

Bartenders are at the front lines of alcohol marketing and play a major role in relation to what, when and how much patrons will consume (Buvik & Rossow, 2015). Much more than simply taking orders and serving, the bartender’s job is to smile, please, entertain, lift the mood, and step in or call for help when problems arise. Many bartenders also see it as their mission to persuade customers to purchase large quantities of alcohol:

Michael (bartender): We tell them [the customers], ‘You should taste this one, it’s good and you can get it for a cheap price’. We get people to buy stuff. You have to sell the product ...

Interviewer: But what difference does it make to you if customers buy or don’t buy?

Michael: It doesn’t matter. But I mean, you want to sell as much as possible, right? ... This is a business after all. You have to sell as much as possible. So we have these competitions between us where we battle on who can sell the most over the course of a night ... We can see on the cash register who sold the most. We want to push it and beat the record.

We found this type of competitive spirit to be particularly strong in the larger venues with a younger crowd. One research assistant on our team conducted participant observations as a bartender at ‘Blue Ray’, a nightclub with a capacity of approximately 400 patrons, and she reported in field notes and an article (Witte, 2012) how she became more and more dedicated to the task of selling ‘as much as possible as quickly as possible’. After just a few nights on the job, she found herself charming the customers, mirroring their behaviour, giving the thumbs up to large orders and using other such tricks to increase sales. She wrote in her field notes: ‘It makes me happy when the selling goes well. It makes me feel that I am good at what I’m doing, and it makes me feel even better when I make customers happy and they smile back at me’. This reaction is only logical given the complex incentive system employed at the ‘Blue Ray’, which encourages bartenders to sell as much alcohol as possible. For example, at staff meetings the manager and bartenders shared tips and tricks on how to make customers spend more. A bartender thus gave the following advice during a meeting: ‘If someone asks for an offer, just tell them that they can have ten shots for 100 kroner and two large draught beers for 40. Then they think they are getting a discount’. The ‘Blue Ray’ actually sold one shot for 10 kroner and one large draught beer for 20 kroner, but it is assumed that drunken customers can be easily convinced that large quantities mean large discounts. The relationship between bartenders and patrons often had a playful and flirtatious element to it, something that may have helped to

avoid conflict and the loss of face, even when bartenders were caught in acts of deception (Spradley & Mann, 1974).

When the sales were going well, the manager at the ‘Blue Ray’ rewarded the bartenders with compliments and applause, and by giving them free drinks during or after opening hours. Bartenders were thus persuaded to encourage customers to drink more and to drink along with them. Across all the venues, most of the bartenders confirmed that they drank on the job on a regular basis, and some indicated that they had felt pressured into drinking by their management, colleagues or customers (Tutenges et al., 2013). It may seem counterproductive that some managers encourage their staff to drink, since this increases the risk of accidents, violence and long-term health problems (Buvik, 2013; Reiling & Nusbaumer, 2006). However, from a sales perspective, an advantage of having bartenders who drink may be that it intensifies the drunken atmosphere and nudges patrons towards more drinking. As authoritative figures, their bodily performances provide social scripts and standards for how patrons should behave when partying (Tutenges, 2013). Bartenders thus play a vital role in steering the atmosphere inside venues. One bartender explained, ‘If you take a shot or two with them [the customers] you get them to buy some shots. So if you party with them, you can get them to drink more, or buy more’. Another bartender said that drinking makes it fun to work, ‘It’s like a party here. I love it’. Moreover, alcohol consumption can make it easier for bartenders to cope with their oftentimes stressful working conditions and live up to requirements set by the management that they interact with the customers in a friendly, playful and flirtatious manner (Witte, 2012).

Denmark has a law against the sale of alcohol to intoxicated individuals, but this law was rarely enforced or adhered to. One bartender explained that his manager allowed staff to deny patrons drinks, ‘if they are threatening or something’, but he had personally never denied anyone drinks. Other bartenders confirmed that they almost always served patrons, as long as they did not fall asleep, vomit or act aggressively inside the venue. Bartenders over-serving is a problem in many countries (Buvik & Rossow, 2015; Hughes et al., 2014), and the reasons behind it include: stressful working conditions in drinking venues; a high tolerance for binge drinking in the NTE; and an elaborate incentive system that pushes bartenders to sell as much as possible as quickly as possible (Buvik, 2013; Witte, 2012). Bartenders’ readiness to over-serve is an important means of ensuring a high turnover of alcohol sales (see also Tutenges et al., 2014).

The logistics of binge drinking

The way that venues are designed, equipped, decorated and filled with sound influences how patrons move, interact, feel and consume (Wilkinson, 2017). The venues in this study all had one or several bar counters which played an important role in respect of how alcohol was presented and sold. Not unlike theatre scenes, bar counters were generally large, centrally positioned and bathed in light. One or several bartenders stood behind them, ready to serve, drinks menus were available and the walls were covered with price lists, alcohol advertisements or bottles of alcohol with spotlights on them. The primary focus was on products containing alcohol and less on other products such as snacks and sodas. One customer described one of his favourite nightclubs as having several bar counters, including ‘a round bar that you can walk around. It’s close to the dance floor. And there’s another bar when you just get through the door ... It’s the first thing you see when you come in. It just says: “Hey, drink” ... First drink, then dance’.

The impression of a theatre scene was particularly strong at venues where the bar counter was on an elevated platform, the seats were fixed and turned towards it or the bartenders performed shows, such as juggling with bottles, dancing and spraying the bar counter with alcohol and then lighting it on fire. Alcohol was usually central to the bartenders’ performances, so the core message conveyed may very well be summarised as ‘Hey, drink’. Patrons’ attention was directed towards

the opportunity to consume alcohol, and the consumption itself was turned into a show.

Music is a vital part of the show inside venues. It was playing more or less constantly in all of the venues, inviting patrons to move their bodies, be active and come together. Some of selected music also incited drinking. For example, one popular song included lines such as, ‘I know what I want to get wasted / So give me a Strawberry Daiquiri / And perhaps a small Havana Club / Nothing like that to turn the tempo up’ (translated from Danish). Lyrics like these have become more and more common in popular music in the UK (Hardcastle et al., 2015), the US (Herd, 2005) and presumably also Denmark. They celebrate alcohol and contribute to the overall atmosphere of drunkenness inside venues.

Importantly, people always and necessarily contribute to the atmospheres that surround them (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015). Dancing is a prime example of this (St. John, 2004). Another conspicuous example was a nightclub where patrons could get a V.I.P. table for the night if they purchased expensive champagne. These tables were placed on elevated platforms next to the dance floor, so that the ‘V.I.P.s’ could watch the dancers from above while being seen with their expensive drinks, which were sometimes held high like trophies. More attention could be attracted through the purchase of the big drinks menu, which came served on a large tray with flashy bottles and sparklers.

The larger venues with a dancefloor had limited seats and tables. This meant that during peak hours the majority of the customers had to stand up and hold their drinks. It has been argued that this ‘vertical drinking’ may lead to a faster drinking pace, since the standing body is less relaxed than the seated body, and also because the drinking can be done with a simple raising of the glass (Kneale, 1999). Moreover, the sparseness of seats allows for a larger density of customers inside the venues, since vertical bodies take up less space than seated ones.

In most venues, alcohol was served exclusively by bartenders working from behind the bar. However, some venues featured supplementary modes of serving, such as: waiters who served at the tables; vending machines with cans of beer; and tables with built-in beer taps allowing the patrons to pour their own beer after having paid for it at the bar. Different modes of serving can take pressure off the bar counter and make it easier and quicker for patrons to purchase alcohol (Measham & Brain, 2005), while making the whole atmosphere around buying and consuming more entertaining.

Shots with between 0.7–1.4 ounces of liquor were widely promoted and sold in the venues. These shots varied considerably in alcohol strength (from around 16 to 45 percent) and were usually consumed within friendship groups in one synchronised go, thus providing group entertainment and swift intoxication. The serving of shots was often also swift: glasses were lined up next to one another and the alcohol poured in one uninterrupted flow from glass to glass. The glasses could then be placed on “shot trays” with rubbery surfaces or small compartments, preventing them from tipping over when carried away from the bar counter. Shots can thus be served and ingested rapidly and may be considered as speed drinking devices, of which the beer bong and large pitchers are other, less frequently used, examples (Measham & Brain, 2005).

Discussion

A number of studies argue that drinking venues, and the wider night-time economy, put pressure on people to purchase and consume alcohol when they go out (e.g. Hobbs et al., 2003). In this study we have used ethnographic methods to expose concretely and in detail how this pressure is exerted within the confines of pubs, bars and nightclubs. We have found that a mix of overt and covert sales techniques are deployed, for example: alcohol advertising; special offers; speed drinking devices; bartenders’ use of strategic intimacy, flirtation and encouragements to buy more; and architectural features that hamper moderate drinking while accelerating the purchase and intake of alcohol. Many drinking venues, especially those oriented to young

customers, thus play an active role in motivating and directing action; we suggest that they may be conceived as staged atmospheres of consumption where individuals are seduced and compelled into alcohol consumption.

In spite of their nebulous nature, atmospheres can be strategically engineered for particular purposes, such as political mobilisation, crime prevention and, as we have illustrated here, profit-making (Bille et al., 2015; Borch, 2014). This does not mean, however, that patrons are passive recipients of the atmosphere that surrounds them; rather, they actively participate in creating and staging that atmosphere (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015). For instance, patrons inevitably contribute to a venue's atmosphere when they move their bodies, place orders, yell 'cheers', clink glasses, kiss, buy another round of shots – or refrain from doing so. The atmosphere in venues is therefore at once constituted by and constitutes the patrons who often emerge from this interchange as thirsty, alcohol-oriented subjects. Indeed, many of the young people we interviewed expressed that they liked venues with a 'wild mood' and 'vibe' that 'lift you', 'blow your mind' and so forth (Böhling, 2015a). In other words, a central motivation for going out is to experiment with altered states of consciousness and intersubjectivity (Malbon, 2002; Measham & Brain, 2005; Vander Ven, 2011). Drinking venues accommodate this motivation while directing it towards alcohol-focused experiences rather than, say, music- and dance-induced experiences. Much like shopping malls and casinos, therefore, the capitalist 'modus operandi' of the drinking venue is 'to coax rather than restrain, reward rather than punish, steer rather than transform' (Schüll, 2012: 50). The resulting atmosphere is by and large a drunken one; one that solicits 'the very affects that desire its continuation' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016: 151).

The logics of capitalist marketing and accumulation are ever-changing (Piketty, 2014), calling for continuous research into these changes and their implications for the population (Zuboff, 2019). The night-time economy should not be left to itself, but has to be carefully monitored by scholars and regulated by the public authorities in order to ensure that it benefits more than harms the population.

Some of the sales techniques that we have exposed in this paper (e.g. alcohol advertisements) have already received considerable attention from researchers and the wider public, whereas others (e.g. bartenders' strategic use of intimacy) are more covert, understudied, and yet highly influential on the level of drinking and drunkenness among patrons. Studying these different techniques is important for understanding contemporary youth and the widespread tendency for heavy drinking in nightlife (Hobbs et al., 2003). Moreover, we hope that bringing increased awareness of these techniques may serve to combat their manipulative powers (Schüll, 2012: 46) and make way for forms of celebration that are less focused on heavy drinking and drunkenness.

Conflicts of interest

We have no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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